

# Interesting Times: Poland, 1981

“May you live in interesting times,” goes a Chinese curse.

Calling 2011 “interesting” is nothing but an understatement for people from several countries in the Middle East. For me, the news about demonstrations and regime changes that started with Egypt’s Hosni Mubarak stepping down brought back memories of a time 30 years ago, when as a fourteen-year-old girl I tried to figure out what the martial law recently imposed in my native country of Poland meant for me and my country’s future.

At that time, Poland had a communist government under the influence of a communist superpower—the Soviet Union. In the fall of 1980, after a wave of protests against government-dictated price increases, striking workers formed an independent trade union *Solidarność* (Solidarity) and elected Lech Wałęsa as its leader. When the Polish Supreme Court acknowledged the legality of *Solidarność*, people were ecstatic. Yet barely a few months later, on December 13, 1981, the government imposed martial law and arrested thousands of *Solidarność* members and suspended union activities.

I still remember that Sunday morning. I turned on the radio to listen to my favorite comedy show, and was surprised to hear classical music on the government-controlled channel. When I turned on the television, I saw General Jaruzelski, recently appointed leader of Poland, announce martial law and all the decrees imposed with it.

I kept a diary at that time and although I wrote mostly about boys and school, I also wrote this:

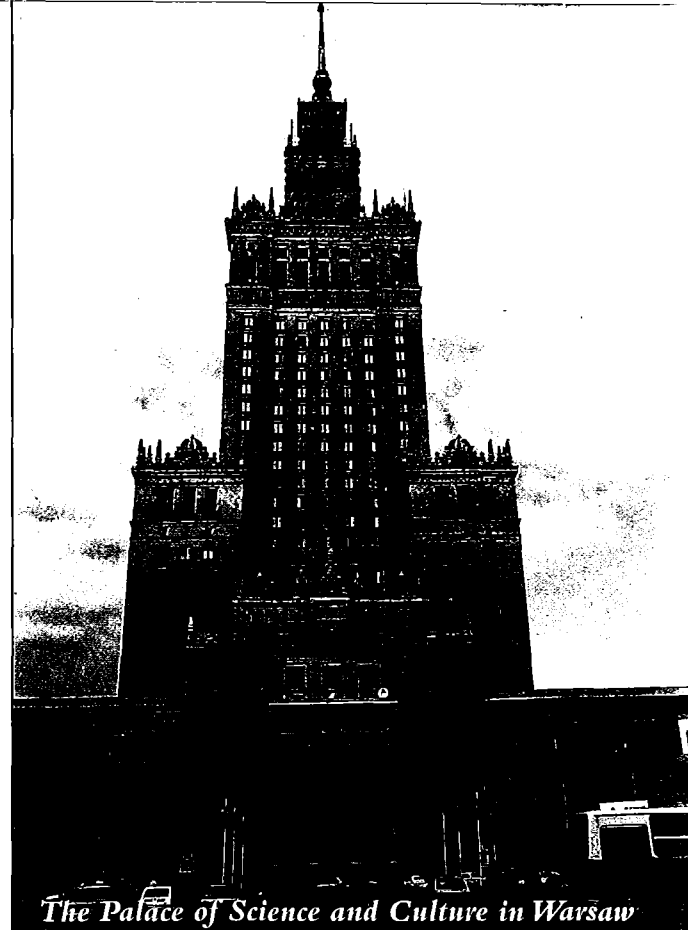
## December 13, 1981

*Oh, wow! I live in historic times. Yesterday Solidarność had a meeting and decided that the government is not suitable for governing anymore, and its powers need to be taken away.*

*So today, the government imposed martial law in Poland. Only one channel on TV is on, and all they do is announce further edicts of the government, talk about the army, or play classical music. Nothing else. Everyone on TV is dressed in military uniform, because the power was taken over by the army. The streets are full of soldiers. Horrible. The government is drafting all men between seventeen and sixty. If Dad comes back from Switzerland, he’ll also have to serve! The border is closed. They’re only letting out the foreigners, and letting in those who are coming back.*

My father was abroad at the time, as were many Polish parents who managed to get a passport and a visa. Wages earned in Western Europe, even as a working hand on a farm, were much higher than the managerial salary that my Dad earned in Poland.

*The phones are turned off. Gas is sold only to military vehicles.*



*You have to have a special permit to leave the city. There’s a curfew. The army stops people in the streets and if someone doesn’t have papers, they’ll take that person to jail. Horrible. It looks like there might be civil war. And if there’s a civil war, the Soviets will intervene, and if the Soviets intervene, the U.S. will get involved too, and there will be World War III, and we’ll be nuked.*

What I wrote may seem melodramatic, and I know now that even if the Soviet Union had invaded Poland the U.S. probably would not have gotten involved militarily. At that time, however, the threat of World War III seemed very real and terrifying to me.

## December 16, 1981

*Because of martial law, we have three weeks of winter break until January 3.*

*The political situation is getting worse. Tomorrow is supposed to be a big demonstration of members of Solidarność. I wonder what will come out of it. Aska’s mom was supposed to come back tomorrow, but she won’t be back for another three months.*

I wasn’t the only kid who didn’t know whether her parent would come back from abroad. My best friend’s mom was abroad at that time as well.

Not good. Just a moment ago I saw tanks heading downtown. What does that mean? I'm getting scared. Things seem to be getting worse. It's the first time I've ever seen tanks in the street. Why are they going downtown? All my silly problems with boys pale in comparison with the threat of a war.

Tanks again. This time around ten. All going downtown. What is happening?

Even though it was 30 years ago, I still remember standing by the kitchen window of our fourth floor apartment, looking at a long row of tanks, water cannons, and busloads of soldiers in full gear heading downtown to stop the demonstrations.

### December 17, 1981

Tanks keep driving by our building. I'm not allowed to go downtown because of the demonstrations. I have to stay home.

### December 23, 1981

Dad came back!

My father could have applied for political asylum in Switzerland and try to bring us to Switzerland later, but he was so worried there might be civil war in Poland, he felt his place was with his wife and two daughters.

Martial law was suspended on December 31, 1982. But the first free elections for the President were held eight years later, in 1990, and Lech Wałęsa, who received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1983, was elected.

As I watch the news about the political unrest in the Middle East, I think of the youth in those countries who are probably just as scared as I was 30 years ago, probably even more. My kids don't realize how lucky they are to live in a country with a stable government.

Words and photo by Jolanta M. Davis, Massachusetts.

## Poems From Nueva Esperanza, Honduras: **Mi escuela** **My School**



Mi escuela es hermosa  
También tiene aulas lindas  
después de mi hogar  
es mi segundo hogar.

Cuando llego a mi escuela  
Ella me recibe muy alegre  
Sus maestros muy contentos  
Nos sonríen al llegar.

Al final del año, me despido  
con nuevos conocimientos  
que en mi casa recuerdo siempre.

*My school is beautiful  
With lovely classrooms  
After my home  
It's my second home  
When I arrive at my school  
It welcomes me joyfully  
The teachers are very content  
They smile at us when we arrive  
At the end of the year, I say goodbye  
I leave with new knowledge  
That I always remember at home.*

Escrito por Evelyln Judith Herrera Sanchez (see photo above), 11, Honduras, Central America.

## **Los niños van pero no se van** **Children Leave But Don't Go Away**

Los niños van, y no se van  
Florecillas de bondad  
Tienen ya pronto alas  
que sirven para volar.

Por los caminos del mundo  
mil sueños tejerán  
será la vida con ellos  
como un adulto más.

Se quedan en los recuerdos  
que nadie podrá borrar  
pero es que todos dicen  
que se van y no se van.

Children leave but they don't go away  
Like flowers of kindness  
Soon they get wings  
That serve them to fly.

Going around the world  
A thousand dreams they'll knit  
Life will treat them  
Like one more adult.

They stay in their memories  
That nobody can erase  
But this is what they all say  
They do leave but they don't go away.



Escrito por Eldy Yolibeth Lopez, 12, Honduras, Central America. Photo: Eldy, her cousin Claudia and dog, Randy.